Key Findings – EPA Nonpoint Source Pollution Focus Groups
November 2001

Awareness of the Problem

Participants were unfamiliar with the term "nonpoint source pollution," and found it to be confusing and non-descriptive. Also, they indicated that the term made them feel that there was nothing they could do personally to address the problem (i.e., nonpoint = no point).

"Stormwater runoff" was a more familiar term and concept, although most respondents viewed themselves as having a passive role with respect to this problem (e.g., stormwater runoff is most obvious during a hard rainfall). They suggested that it might be more effective to use a term that carries the implication of "personal water pollution"

While some of the participants had heard the word "watershed", few knew the definition of a watershed or could name their watershed. Most did not see the importance of understanding this term in order to understand the problem of nonpoint source pollution.

Respondents could not recall a public awareness campaign highlighting the problem of nonpoint source pollution. A number surmised that perhaps this is a new, or rapidly growing problem that EPA now wants to address.

Many people were already taking personal actions that prevent nonpoint source pollution (e.g., proper disposal of oil, solvents, and chemicals; elimination of pesticides and fertilizers), but were unaware that these actions actually addressed this problem.

Many younger respondents indicated that they received little formal or informal education about conservation, pollution prevention, or other types of environmental stewardship. They added that the failure to emphasize these topics has resulted in them believing that modern technology must be adequate to address and correct any serious environmental issues. In contrast, many of the older participants recalled both school coursework (e.g. ecology and conservation units) and public service announcements (Smokey the Bear, Woodsy Owl, and the Crying Indian) aimed at educating them about actions they could take to conserve the environment. The older respondents not only seemed more attuned to the multitude of environmental issues, but also were taking more voluntary personal actions to conserve resources and prevent pollution.

Message Testing

Respondents generally agreed that a public awareness campaign targeting pollution prevention should include messages communicating both personal responsibility for the problem and personal actions that will ameliorate the problem. They remarked that messages describing this problem in more general terms (e.g., a community problem) would not convey that personal action is the desired outcome of the initiative.

Messages should clearly and dramatically demonstrate the immediate cause-and-effect relationship between personal polluting behaviors and resulting nonpoint source pollution. These messages, regardless of the medium used, should stimulate strong visual images and hard-hitting visceral reactions (i.e., "gross is OK"). Also, these messages do not have to be entirely believable (e.g., television PSA showing motor oil seeping from microwaved frozen fishsticks; animals talking about the disgusting polluted water).

Messages linking nonpoint source pollution to adverse health consequences seem to be both attention-getting and motivating, particularly to younger respondents. These participants seemed particularly concerned when told that drinking water (both from treatment plants and commercial bottlers) is not routinely tested for certain contaminants. Also, they expressed concern over the relationship between nonpoint source pollution and food contamination. Messages relating nonpoint source pollution to contamination of recreation areas are also relevant and highlight that even if water treatment plants make your water safe to drink, this technology does not make the lake or river in which you swim any cleaner.

Messages should challenge the common misconception that industry is the major contributor to river pollution. The respondents were generally surprised to learn that most river pollution is caused by the public, and offered that while people often view statistics with skepticism, a simple statement of fact can be persuasive.

Messages suggesting that a person should talk to a "polluting" neighbor elicited mixed reactions. For example, while most agreed they would talk to a close neighbor or friend whom they observed dumping oil or solvents down a storm drain, they would be reluctant to approach a person they did not know well. Some added that in these times, the other person might interpret a low-key approach as confrontational, and could react in an unpredictable (e.g., aggressive or violent) manner.

It is important to develop a series of interrelated multimedia messages with a single "look and feel." For example, the respondents liked the recurring theme of the "Don't Waste Utah" campaign. They remarked it would be effective to use television and radio public service announcements to "brand nonpoint source pollution, and then use established and recognizable messages and images on billboards, collateral materials, and premium items

Outreach Venues

Radio and television were mentioned as the more preferred venues for providing the public with information about nonpoint source pollution. Many respondents said they do not take the time to read flyers, brochures, newspaper and magazine articles. Some noted that billboards are probably the most effective type of print communication. They reacted unenthusiastically to using the Internet as an educational venue, noting that they tend to use electronic communication for e-mail and entertainment.

Talk and news radio were mentioned as the best type of radio programming for information about nonpoint source pollution. Also, radio stations could offer pollution prevention tips during the traffic and weather reports. Education offered via television could include stories on programs such as *Dateline, 60 Minutes*, and *20-20*; video news releases during the nightly news, pollution prevention tips from the meteorologist during the evening news weather forecast; and creative public service announcements featuring local and national personalities.

Both younger and older respondents emphasized the importance of EPA working with schools to develop and implement programs targeting young children with information about nonpoint source pollution. Such programs could explain the problem in simple and relevant terms, and describe the kinds of actions that kids and their family members can take to prevent this (and other) kinds of pollution. They said this would have a two-fold benefit. First, it would increase children's awareness of the importance of pollution prevention and conservation as important matters. Secondly, children would probably assume an active role as environmental educators by bringing home this new information and convincing their caregivers, siblings, friends, and other family members to take positive actions to prevent pollution.